

Church of Our Lady of Refuge
Main Plaza at Estrella Street
Roma, Texas

HABS TEX 3135

HABS
TEX
214 ROMA
4-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

CHURCH OF OUR LADY OF REFUGE OF SINNERS

Roma, Starr County, Texas

TEX.
214-Roma
H

ADDRESS: Main Plaza at Estrella Street, Roma, Texas
OWNER: Catholic Church
OCCUPANT: Catholic congregation of Roma, Texas
USE: Church

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Though Franciscan missionaries had been an important stabilizing device in the Rio Grande area of Texas and northern Mexico since 1690, the parishes were secularized in 1821--and less and less religious activity began to occur as a result. Revolutions terminating in 1836 resulted in a dearth of priests, and spiritual neglect was evident in all quarters of the fatiguing Rio Grande country.

This neglect, however, soon became a challenge to Father John Timon; and he attempted, with twelve brother Vicentians, to revive the spiritually starved area along the Gulf of Mexico in Texas between 1838 and 1848. This revival led to the founding of the Diocese of Galveston in 1847. It was but a bare beginning, as the twelve priests were expected to serve a scattered population of approximately 200,000 persons.

The Texas challenge continued to be extended, and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate answered it. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 confirmed the north bank of the Rio Grande to the United States. This area included some thirty parishes along the river, and the Oblates were attracted to the potential implied herein.

The first Oblates were Fathers Pierre Telmon and Alexander Soulerin. They eventually found themselves in Brownsville, and the Oblates were established when Holy Mass on the feast of the Immaculate Conception was heard on the 8th day of December, 1849. However, apparent lack of immediate success caused the withdrawal of the mission at Brownsville early in 1851.

A second attempt would occur. Land was ceded for the purposes of a seminary college for young men in Galveston as well as a parish site plus a school site in Brownsville (this decision was made on November 14, 1851). This encouraged new missionaries with renewed vigor to leave Le Havre on the Belle Assise in March, 1852. On May 11, the ship docked at New Orleans, then continued with a select group to Galveston. Among this select group was a man by the name of Peter Keralum.

Though a frame church had been established at Brownsville, the first permanent church of the Oblates was constructed at Roma---Roma being half way between Laredo and Brownsville. It was felt that from this centralized position the missionaries could more easily reach the fields of their labor. Father Keralum was not only the architect, but was stonecutter and mason as well.

In the archives of the church is recorded in Latin the following: "On the 18th day of September, 1854, on the feast of the Octave of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Most Reverend Jean-Marie Odin, Bishop of the Diocese of Galveston, assisted by the Reverend James Benavides, pastor of the church at Mier, and two Oblate Fathers J. M. Gaye and Pierre Keralum, laid the cornerstone and dedicated the church to the Virgin Mary under the title of the Refuge of Sinners."

It seems reasonable to include a short biography of the architect. Pierre Yves Keralum (often abbreviated to Peter Kalum, known as 'El Santo Padre Pedrito,' or the 'Lost Missionary') was born in Quimper, Brittany, on the 2nd of March, 1817. After completing his secondary education, he became a cabinetmaker---later studying architecture in Paris. Following some success as an architectural practitioner in Paris, he made his profession as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and was ordained the following year (in 1852 at age 35). In addition to designing the church at Roma in 1854, he designed and supervised the Immaculate Conception Church in Brownsville (1859) as well as assisting the secular priests at Laredo in the construction of the St. Augustine Church in 1872.

Father Keralum's strenuous activity for twenty years along the Rio Grande--including personal restraints which were injurious to health--caused him to age prematurely. Being a horseback priest, he necessarily went from ranch to ranch on extended journeys. Leaving Brownsville on the 9th of November, 1872, Father Keralum, almost blind, began a circuit which would not permit his return until after the New Year. On November 12 and on schedule, he arrived at the ranch called Tampacuas (four miles north of Mercedes). From there, he departed for the ranch of Las Piedras some eighteen miles northward. He never arrived at this

station. On the 15th of November, his horse was found unfettered, but dragging a lariat. Immediately, search parties were assembled; but no trace could be found of the luckless priest. Three months later, on the 18th of February, Requiem High Mass was celebrated in his honor at Brownsville. Much speculation and rumor resulted from this disappearance.

In 1882, a ranchero from Las Pitatas by the name of Manuel Aleman went into thick chapparral to disentangle two cows. While engaged in this activity, he found the skeletal remains of Father Keralum---identified by his Oblate cross, the chalice and paten, a holy oil stock, altar-bread box, a holy water bottle, a piece of a rosary, an altar bell, a watch and eighteen dollars in silver.

It was surmised that he had lost his way, was possibly bitten by a rattlesnake while resting; or possibly succumbed from natural causes encouraged by his many personal privations.

REFERENCES AND SOURCES

- | | |
|---|--|
| Doyon, Bernard, O. M. I. | <u>The Cavalry of Christ on the Rio Grande</u>
Bruce Press. Milwaukee. 1956 |
| Oblates Mary Immaculate | <u>Notices Necrologiques des Membres de la Congregation.</u>
Paris and Rome, 1841-1948.
(Fr. Keralum. Vol II, p 401) |
| Lott, Virgil N. and
Martinez, Mercurio | <u>The Kingdom of Zapata.</u>
The Naylor Company. San Antonio.
1953. |
| | <u>The Mission Times.</u>
Volume XXVIII. No. 10.
Friday, December 4, 1936
Section III, Page 5. |

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural interest and merit: The Gothic Revival structure is basically rectangular in plan with a second story gallery at the tower end. There is a room designated as a sacristy on the northeast. The detailing of the brickwork is very good, while the detailing of the wooden portions is very poor. The condition of the fabric is fair.

B. Technical description of the exterior.

1. Overall dimensions. The dimensions of the principal structure are twenty nine feet four inches by eighty four feet.
2. Foundations. Local sandstone continuous bearing. Roma has a dense underlying strata of sandstone.
3. Wall construction. Except for tower and west facade which are locally manufactured brick, all other wall construction is local sandstone rubble laid with flush mortar joints.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc. Tower on west facade forms entry vestibule. Stairway to gallery leads up from this vestibule.
5. Chimneys. None extant.
6. Openings. Nine panel wooden door with arched tympanum. These doors double doors on west facade. Windows wood double hung with gothic arch fixex tympanum above.
7. Roof. Wood shingle gabled roof. Parapets of ornamented brick on west facade. Simple wood eaves with rafters exposed north and south.

C. Technical description of the interior.

1. Floor Plans. See 'Architectural interest and merit' above.
2. Stairways. Wood stair to gallery overlooking nave. Not important.
3. Flooring. Pine.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Walls plastered smoothly; ceiling beaded wood (originally covered with canvas).
5. Doorways and doors. Wood.
6. Trim. Wood.
7. Hardware. Not significant.
8. Lighting. Not significant.
9. Heating. By stoves.

D. Site.

1. Orientation. Principal facade faces plaza to west.
2. Enclosures. None extant, though there was probably a fence around churchyard.
3. Outbuildings. Convent to the north; another residence building of more modern type to the south. Offices in separate building to the east.
4. Walks, driveways, etc. Some brick retaining walls remaining. Concrete entrance walk probably brick in original.
5. Landscaping, gardens, etc. None extant.

PREPARED BY W. Eugene George, Jr. 6 January 1962
W. Eugene George, Jr. A. I. A.

APPROVED Charles S. Pope DATE 20 April 1962
Charles S. Pope
Supervising Architect, Historic Structures
Western Office, National Park Service